Indian Writers

J P Das

Stories







grassroots

Grassroots
Indian Writers Series

J P (Jagannath Prasad) Das was born in 1936 and educated at the universities of Utkal and Allahabad. A Homi Bhaba Fellow, he holds a doctorate in art history and has published eight collections of stories, nine volumes of poetry, one novel and five plays. Among his works available in English translation are *The Magic Deer* (1984), *The Forbidden Street* (1987), *Spider's Web* (1990), *The Prostitute and Other Stories* (1995), *The Pukka Sahib* (2001), collections of stories; *First Person* (1976), *Love is a Season* (1978), *Timescapes* (1980) and *Lovelines* (2001), collections of poetry; and plays *Before the Sunset* (1978), *The Underdog* (1984) and *Sundardas* (2002). He turned down the National Sahitya Akademi Award given to him in 1991.

Paul St-Pierre, Leelawati Mohapatra and K K Mohapatra have co-edited *Ants, Ghosts and Whispering Trees: An Anthology of Oriya Short Stories* (HarperCollins India, 2003).

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Translated from the Oriya by
Paul St-Pierre, Leelawati Mohapatra and K K Mohapatra

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Contents

The Spider's Web

'A bad omen,' Sadhna whimpered, wringing her hands.

'Hmm.' Rohit lolled on the bed, exhaling a plume of cigarette smoke.

'An ill omen, I tell you, this twitching of the left eye.'

Rohit blew a perfect smoke ring. 'Hurry up or you'll be late for the office. Don't let your boss give you a dressing down.'

'Dressing down?' She looked at her watch. 'Oh God! Pass me the hairpins, will you? If I'm not ready in two minutes flat, I'll have to report sick.'

Rohit swung off the bed and rummaged through the things on the dressing table. 'So cluttered,' he said. 'Here, take all six.' He tried taking her in his arms. 'By the look of it, you won't be ready in two minutes.'

'Let's see.'

'Mmm, that's a maddening perfume you're wearing.'

She wriggled out of his embrace and started changing her clothes.

Rohit watched with fascination. Until recently she had insisted that he look away. For him, it had been a long journey from her drawingroom to her bedroom, from nodding acquaintance to passionate lover. She was most definitely not the greatest beauty on earth, but as far as he was concerned there was no one more adorable.

Everyone else paled into insignificance in her presence. And the day she accepted him, naive that he was, he had wished he could have died and not outlived the moment of his greatest happiness. The future held such perilous possibilities that he felt dizzy. His body had ached with a fulfilling bliss. What had he had before meeting Sadhna, anyway? Success? Status? Prosperity? What did all that amount to? Nothing! The day she had slipped her hand into his she had made him forget his work, profit and loss accounts, friends, relations, acquaintances, the earth, the stars, the planet, the solar system, heaven, hell, birth, death, rebirth, all at one go. She had exuded the magic fragrance of oblivion. Her first embrace had wiped out his childhood and adolescence, her first kiss his youth of fanciful dreams, imagination and aspirations. In the moist twilight of her bedroom he lost, regained and lost again his identity, memory, and all his tomorrows.

He hugged her from behind.

'Lay off. I'm late already.'

To hell with the office, he thought. May it catch fire. May your fat boss drop dead. May the third world war break out. Let you go, my girl? Forget it.

But he did not say a thing. To him, she always remained an enchanting enigma, and he was as unsure as ever how to deal with her.

He released her and went back to the bed.

She tucked the pins in her hair, smoothed her sari, and put on a pair of earrings. Strapping on her shoes she sprayed perfume all over herself yet again.

Then she turned and fastened a liquid gaze on him. 'But who says I'm going to the office?'

'Hurray!' His heart leaped. The gloomy uncertainty was over. He jumped off the bed and took her in his arms, and they kissed.

She pushed him away gently, wiped her mouth with her handkerchief and applied a fresh coat of lipstick. 'Wait, I'll make you some tea.'

He retreated to the clammy corner of the bed, resigned to her unpredictable ways.

She kicked off her shoes, unpinned her hair and threw the hairpins on the dressing-table. As she emptied her purse, she threw him a mysterious smile and vanished into the kitchen.

Rohit lit another cigarette and stared vacantly at the wall.

A spider was crawling across it.

He wondered where it would go.

It stopped in the corner near the door and set about spinning a web. First the deft outlines of a hexagonal

field. Then the quick, sure threads from the corners to the centre.

He sat back and watched.

The spider bustled about, an air of vibrant mystery surrounding it.

Sadhna walked in noiselessly. 'Here's your tea.'

Rohit started.

'What's the matter?'

'Look, there's a spiderweb in the northeast corner of the room. What does it portend – good or evil?'

'Whichever, I'm going to dust it away right off.'

'Oh, no!' he interjected as though he was himself woven into the grand design of the web. 'Leave it alone. The poor spider has taken great pains to weave it. Don't you find it lovely?'

He remained engrossed in his thoughts for a minute or two.

'A penny for your thoughts!' she said.

'Sorry.' He looked up at her. 'Our relationship – er – relation – er – don't you think it's a bit like the web?'

'What makes you think that?' She was suddenly very serious. 'Is it so fragile?'

'Far from it. It's so lovely, so shimmering, so out of this world!'

Sadhna cut him short. 'Perhaps you find it a

deathtrap?'

There was no answer to such a question, he knew from experience, and an unguarded conversation could only lead to a bizarre conclusion. 'Come closer,' he said, 'and I'll whisper the answer into your ear.'

She moved away from him, but came back and took a chair next to the bed.

Every movement of hers was full of mystery.

Presently she put her cup down on the table, rushed into his arms and pressed her lips onto his.

'Did you know,' he said, 'that the thread of a spiderweb is stronger than steel wire of the same thickness?'

'Rubbish. Whoever sold you that yarn?'

'Well, I read it somewhere.'

'If that were true people would use spider's web rather than steel wire. And the poor wretched spiders would be forced to devise some other method of catching their prey. Come, let's hear what else you know about spiders.'

'The female of the species gobbles up the male.'

'How wonderful!'

She slowly unbuttoned his shirt and peeled it off. 'Want to see how she goes about it?'

Before he could answer she sank her teeth into his arm.

An incredible pang of ecstasy spiced with pain shot through his body.

She bit into his arm again.

Tears came to his eyes. 'Stop,' he begged hoarsely, 'or I'll scream.'

'Go ahead. Scream,' she said. 'Don't ever talk to me about spiders, right?'

He glanced at his arm. It hurt. The tooth-marks glistened; a little blood began to ooze out.

'Oh dear, I've gone and bitten a little too hard,' she said, wiping the blood with the end of her sari. 'Does it hurt? I hope nothing will happen. Shall I wash it with a little dettol or something?'

'Never mind. I'd like it to fester so that I'll have to have my arm amputated. Anything to remember this afternoon by.'

'Don't talk like that.' She moved away from him. 'I promise I'll never do it again.'

'Why don't you change your sari if you aren't going to the office?'

'Makes little difference now. It's already crumpled. Now tell me, do you want to stay here or push off?'

'Stay here. Till eternity, if you allow me to.'

'But what about your business? What'll happen to it? You may be losing good money this very moment.'

'Maybe. Who knows?'

'Hey, I haven't the foggiest idea of what you really do. You never tell me anything about your business. But look at me, I keep filling you in on the most trivial details of my office.'

'But you know, business is such a drag. The humdrum ins and outs of the hardware trade would certainly not interest you. Your office, on the contrary, is so damn lively, so terrific. Interesting people, interesting goings-on. Besides, Sadhna, you love talking about them, don't you? And how I love listening to you!'

'You do?'

'And business is full of problems . . .'

'Don't give me that dope, love. I too have a bunch of problems. In and out of the office. I live in this flat all by myself. That's a problem, isn't it? I skip office at the slightest whim. Isn't that another? Who knows what music I might have to face tomorrow? Anyway, the point is you keep your affairs pretty much to yourself. Just shows how little you care for me.'

'What's the point of burdening you with such details? They won't interest you, I'm sure. You aren't a business rival; I don't purposely keep things from you.'

'The other day you ran into somebody in the lobby of the hotel we went to for dinner. I asked you who he was, but you wouldn't say.'

'When? I don't even remember. I must've been a little

absentminded. Why didn't you ask me a second time?'

'Why should I have? What did it matter to me who he was? All I'm saying is you can be awfully indifferent at times.'

'Oh, my God, indifferent to you?' How could he explain what she meant to him, how she occupied every corner of his mind?

'The other day I begged you to spend the evening with me, but you marched out.'

'But didn't I tell you I had a client to look up?'

'That just shows how little you care for my feelings. Your business is always more important. Are you sure you don't have a client to look up today?'

'Come, I'll never make that mistake again. Forget my engagements. I'll keep you company for as long as you wish.'

'That's up to you. I'm not asking you.'

'You wish me gone, do you?'

'That's up to you. What do I know of your engagements?'

'Why don't you tell me clearly?'

'I'm not saying anything either way. You're free to do as you please.'

'Do you mind if I stick around?'

'I don't care either way. If you feel like staying on, stay on. If you feel like leaving, the way out is the way

you came in.'

He propped himself up on the bed and looked at the wall. Its web completed, the spider had vanished. He hurried off the bed, put on his shirt and shuffled for his shoes.

'On your way already?' she asked.

'Yes.'

'When do we meet again?'

'Whenever you wish. I'm only a telephone call away.'

'Must you come only when asked and never on your own?'

He said nothing.

'Are you cross with me?'

He didn't answer.

She unbuttoned her blouse and offered him a generous slice of her shoulder. 'Bite here and call it quits.'

He tied his shoe-laces.

'So this is how it ends, huh?' she said.

His head was in a whirl. He was feeling weak in his legs and his lips were numb. Dazed, he took a step towards the door.

'Leaving?'

'Yes.'

He stopped by the door. The web hung inches above him. It was woven of strands of vivid silver, an enveloping hammock of intricate, transparent weave.

The air seemed full of billowing snares. He stretched a finger towards it, and a thread snapped at his faintest touch.

He came back to bed and slowly began to take off his shoes. 'Sadhna, my dear,' he said, with an inscrutable smile on his face. 'I'm not leaving you. Not even if you throw me out.'

The Interlude

A strange feeling stole over Ranjana after she saw her husband and children off. She was all alone, and the usually bustling house was unnaturally empty, silent. She couldn't recollect a single time when she had been all by herself as she was this evening. Hers was a large family of brothers and sisters, of uncles and aunts; the family she had married into was at least as large, if not larger; even years later, when she and her husband, Ashutosh, moved into a house of their own, she had had her two children around. And never did a day go by without some relation or other dropping in. She felt strange now, a little flustered, a little unsettled. Only a short while ago the kids and the dog – even the servant boy had left two days ago on a short vacation – had brought the roof down with their commotion. The news of her father-in-law suddenly becoming ill had reached them in the late afternoon and Ashutosh had decided to leave for the village immediately. The children, their school closed for the Puja holidays, had insisted on accompanying him. She would gladly have gone with them, but her classes at college weren't over yet.

She closed the door and went into the bedroom. She had had an early dinner with Ashutosh and the children, and now suddenly there was nothing to do. She sat on the bed and looked around. A feeling of fear and anxiety

overtook her, only to be chased away by indefinable surges of excitement. She threw herself on the bed, closing her eyes, with no hope of falling asleep early. What could she do? Was there anything, anything at all, anything personal she could do only when she was all alone? Indeed, was there anything strictly personal at all? Every small or big event – all joy, sorrow, desire, experience, encouragement, excellence – had included the entire family, and there didn't seem to be a life for her beyond husband, children and home; when she wasn't being a wife she was being a mother, and vice versa; her job at the college was an insignificant part of her life.

But nobody had foisted it on her, this life; she had chosen it for herself. Unambitious from childhood, she had finished college and agreed to marry the man her parents chose for her. Ashutosh, fresh from medical college, had just joined government service. His salary was low, and Ranjana took it upon herself to make both ends meet. That kept her busy. Ashutosh moved from one town to another. She bore him two sons. Then Ashutosh was transferred to this small place, where for the first time he began to make a little money on the side by setting up a private practice. Just when it began to flourish he was transferred again, but this time he decided to give

up his job. In none of these momentous decisions had Ranjana had a say; curiously enough, she seemed to have no interest in anything beyond looking after her home and bringing up the children.

When a women's college opened, it was Ashutosh who goaded her into becoming a lecturer. Initially, she hadn't warmed to the idea, having blissfully forgotten everything she had once studied. The prospect of teaching was something she dreaded, but Ashutosh swamped her with the textbooks she needed. She continued to raise objections: who would look after the children if she went to college, since she'd be away almost the whole day? Ashutosh lost no time in arranging for a full time servant. Then the man who ran the college, a patient of Ashutosh's, joined in in trying to persuade her. Her fear of the job made her so jittery that she fell ill, but Ashutosh stuffed her with enough medicine to have her up and about in a few days. In the end there was just no way she could avoid taking on the job.

Only a few days before she started lecturing she discovered she didn't have a single decent sari to wear. In the last few years she had become as indifferent to clothes as to her figure. After the birth of their first child she had lost all interest in sex and had silently suffered her husband's regular lovemaking as an unavoidable

duty. She had stopped taking care of her own health, too. She wasn't overly bothered if she skipped a bath now and then when she was busy with chores; even the basics, like combing her hair, washing the grease and oil off her hands and face, had taken a back seat to other things. She looked after the cow and the dog herself and had grown to look upon dirt and untidiness as only human. The house was always a mess.

She realised she would have to take better care of her appearance now that she was joining the college, that her usual slovenly, unkempt look would not do. She had so happily neglected her looks in the past that even when Ashutosh sometimes showed his displeasure it had no effect on her. She was, in a word, wedded to a placid, if a bit slovenly, existence.

Stepping out of the house to teach in the college was like setting foot into another world. Not only did she have to be conscious of her clothes and appearance, but she also had to deal with strangers, and in the beginning, it all got on her nerves. Then she hit upon an ideal solution: she would maintain only a working relationship with her colleagues, only as much as was absolutely necessary, and not have anything to do with the college other than the classes she was required to teach. By and by she paid less and less attention to the way she dressed and began to show up at the college her hair undone

and untidy. It didn't bother her too much that others might find her a sight. As far as she was concerned the college was only an aberration – a departure from the normal routine of life; and she erased it completely from her mind the moment she reached home.

Despite her studied indifference and lack of warmth, however, her colleagues didn't exactly leave her alone. In between classes they made overtures to draw her out. Her husband was a doctor, after all, and her female colleagues had a vested interest in keeping in touch. They poured their hearts out to her, bared their innermost souls; in fact, some of them showed no hesitation about confessing their most intimate secrets. But Ranjana remained tight-lipped about herself. She neither encouraged nor took interest in their confidences; she showed no curiosity whatsoever and always heard them out in bored silence. Beyond family, clothes and keeping house the only other topic her colleagues displayed an avid interest in was people's love life. They were up on all the town scandals, and delighted in graphically describing the affairs. Their two male colleagues of course merited special attention. Of the two, one was as dull as he was middle-aged; the other, who naturally figured more in their gossip, was Srimant, a handsome young man. From the little contact Ranjana had with this colleague, she took him to be a

polite and well-behaved person, and she could scarcely believe the dirt her colleagues dished out about him.

Lying in bed, she began to think about her female colleagues. What would they do if they were to suddenly find themselves all alone? What would Pravina do, for instance? She had been in love with somebody before her marriage and had saved all his love letters. Would she take them out and read them? What would Niharika do? She claimed Srimant was after her even though she had not encouraged him at all, but her claim had always been dismissed as wishful thinking. Would she think up ways of arranging a tryst with Srimant? What about Jyoti, Susama, Anuradha, none of whom had anything sensational to brag about? What would they do – reflect on their lacklustre love life? How would they spend the long night?

She suddenly knew what she would do. There was one incident in her life she could mull over. It had happened almost a decade ago and had nothing to do with her life since, and quite often in the recent past, whether due to the pressure of life or due to the strange situation she was in, the details had begun to blur; sometimes she even felt that perhaps it hadn't happened after all and was only a figment of her imagination.

She sat up. It wouldn't do to summon up the memories

of the incident in just any old way; she must make the proper preparations. First of all, she would have to dress suitably. Unhurriedly, she took off her clothes one by one. She had all the time on earth, a whole long night ahead of her. Naked, she ran her hand over her body and felt a tingling sensation spread through her. She stretched, swung off the bed and walked to the mirror. For the first time in years she was seeing the whole of herself in what seemed like a strange act of self-discovery. Speechless, she looked herself up and down. So much flesh! The years had endowed her thin frame with a wholesome roundness, with which she began to acquaint herself by running her hands slowly over her body, caressing it everywhere. She scrutinised herself from several angles, turning and twirling in front of the mirror.

It was a novel experience for her to be standing there, naked. She stepped out of the bedroom, and as she walked into the other rooms, she flicked the lights on and strutted about as if she wanted to advertise her transformed self, daring the darkness lingering in the corners to take a good look at her, to stretch out and touch her to see how real she was, to soak into her, to get intimate with her. She sat down for a while, then sprang up and stepped into the corridor; there she stood leaning on the wall for some time; afterwards she

crossed over to the kitchen and drank a glass of water. Then she entered the bathroom, and was, out of habit, about to close the door when it dawned on her that that wasn't necessary, and joyfully she offered herself up under the shower.

She adjusted to the new life and had a fine balance worked out between home and college. In time, the college became a routine. The syllabus was the same year after year, only faces in her classes changed, and she was hopeful she'd be able to continue, much the same way she ran her home, until it was time for retirement. But after a few years, the pressure got to her. She had to have a doctorate. She would much rather have foregone the promotion than wade through the trouble of doing research, but once again it was Ashutosh who practically forced her into it. Not only did he fix up a thesis director for her, but he took the trouble to collect books for her from various libraries. Her topic was on a little-known period of Orissa history, and after a few months of indifference she began to take an interest. Not only did she write her thesis with a great degree of self-confidence, but she submitted it to the university on time.

She felt a chill come over her and wondered how long

she had stood under the shower. Stepping out, she dried herself vigorously, went into the bedroom and stood before the mirror. The dressing table drawers were crammed with bottles of cosmetics she never used. She put kohl in her eyes and combed her hair with long smooth strokes. A glow of satisfaction lighted her up as she preened before the mirror.

Both examiners were full of praise for her thesis, but the London-based one commented in passing that the research would remain incomplete if the primary sources available in the India Office Library were not consulted. He also went out of his way to mention that he was willing to help the scholar locate them should she wish to examine them. Ranjana was somewhat disappointed by his remark, but she was curious to know what she had missed out on. She ruled out the possibility of ever going to London, however; the thesis could go to hell for all she cared.

Once again it was Ashutosh who wouldn't let things lie. He made Ranjana write to the British professor. When his reply came it turned out to be very encouraging. The university agreed to fund her travel expenses. An inexpensive paying-guest accommodation was located in London. Matters moved smoothly, in spite of her mounting panic. The day the tickets and the visa arrived,

she came down with a raging fever, which she felt was a good enough pretext for calling the visit off. But Ashutosh not only looked after her but got the journey postponed by a few days. He also made an elaborate list of what she might need in London and bought everything for her.

She opened the almirah, looking for something to wear, and her eyes fell on the pair of jeans tucked away under the pile of saris. She hadn't worn them in ages and had completely forgotten that she had ever owned something like that. Sitting on the edge of the bed, she struggled to push her legs into them; they were tight at the waist. She had not realized how much weight she had put on. Sucking in her tummy, she somehow managed to button them up. She walked about a little to stretch them and did a few sit-ups. She went back to the almirah to select a top and rummaged around until she found a soft cashmere pullover. She put on a pair of socks before looking at herself again in the mirror.

When she landed at Heathrow and was standing in the queue to go through immigration she was almost in tears. She had never been away from home, let alone abroad, by herself. Everyone around her was a stranger, cold, closed and distant. She fiddled with her watch

trying to adjust it to the local time; mercifully, an elderly white man standing next to her helped her with that. She had to wait a long time for her turn, and by the time she was through it was already two o'clock. Outside, the afternoon had become damp and grey. She felt a massive depression take hold of her soul. Why had she bothered to take all this trouble to travel there? But when the taxi entered London, she felt a little better. She was getting to see a new place, after all; besides, it wouldn't be for too long, just three weeks. What mattered most was collecting and studying materials for her research. An hour later the taxi dropped her at her address and she rang the bell. An Indian woman opened the door and welcomed her; Ranjana felt a surge of joy, dampened somewhat by the rather hefty taxi fare.

Mrs Patel helped her carry her suitcase upstairs. Of the three rooms on the first floor, the middle one was for her. Old Mrs Patel, originally from Kenya, had, after her husband's death, started renting out rooms, mostly to overseas students and scholars. She explained the rules of the house: supper was at six; the guests made their own breakfast – they were welcome to use her fridge and gas burner – and took lunch outside; they could use her phone, but only to receive calls, to make calls they had to go to the phone booth outside; so on and so forth. She collected a week's rent in advance and

showed her around the kitchen. All the other guests were out and Ranjana felt at ease. But when she learnt there was only one toilet upstairs, which she would have to share, her heart sank. Mercifully, the jet lag began to get to her the moment Mrs Patel left her alone: without changing she lay down on the bed and fell asleep.

She paraded before the mirror. Ashutosh had bought her the jeans on the eve of her London trip; the beautiful orange-coloured pullover was something she had bought for herself on her third day in London. She looked so radiant, so different: really, how vastly different her body, used to being wrapped in a sari, looked now! She seemed to have grown years younger and certainly much more full of life. She sat in front of the dressing table and applied a coat of polish to her nails. Inaugurating a lipstick she had long neglected, she painted her lips a flaming red. When she stood up, her hands on her hips, she rolled her head sideways to get a better look at herself, making broad winks; pleased with what she saw, she leaned over, hugged the mirror and gave it a big kiss.

Exactly at six in the evening Mrs Patel woke her up and took her downstairs for supper. The other guests had still not returned. The sky had cleared and it was swathed

in bright sunshine. Ranjana found it a little strange to have dinner before dark. There was still so much light, and she remembered that in the west the sunlight lingered on until well past eight in the evening. After supper she went back to bed but couldn't fall asleep immediately. Thoughts of her children and husband came crowding into her mind and she wondered how she would survive without them the three long weeks ahead of her. She resolved to find a phone booth first thing in the morning and call Ashutosh. But how would she find a booth? The very thought made her cry. How would she get in touch with her professor? Would he understand her accent? How would she get onto the buses and the Underground trains to reach the India Office Library? Even as she agonised she drifted asleep; and when she awoke next morning it was already seven o' clock. She hurried to the bathroom before others could use it, put on a new salwar and kurta and went down to the kitchen for a cup of tea.

She filled the kettle with water, but wasn't able to light the gas burner. So badly did she want some tea that she tried once again, but just didn't seem to remember how to work it. Defeated, she sat down with a sigh. Outside, a steady drizzle fell. Her gloom deepened. If only she didn't have to step out of Mrs Patel's house! Just then a young Indian man came into

the room and with a pleasant greeting inquired whether she would like to have some tea with him. She nodded eagerly. The fellow brewed the tea and brought the pot to the table. Pulling up a chair opposite her, he sat down and introduced himself. His name was Javed Akhtar, and he was from Pakistan, here to do a three-month course. Ranjana introduced herself, but already the joy of seeing him had evaporated. Not only was he a Muslim, but he was from Pakistan into the bargain. She hurriedly drank her tea and left. There'd be enough time later to ask Mrs Patel to show her again how the burner worked. She went back to her room.

An hour later she came down and found Mrs Patel having tea with a young Englishman. David was her daughter's fiancé. They both worked some place outside London, where they had met and fallen in love; he was in town on a short business trip. When Ranjana turned to Mrs Patel for help in finding a phone booth and reaching her professor, Mrs Patel asked her future son-in-law if he'd be kind enough to be of assistance. David said that Ranjana should get ready soon, as he was about to go out. Mrs Patel lent them an old umbrella.

The phone booth was just around the corner. With the money she gave him David bought her phone cards and dialled the overseas number she wanted; she had her first talk with Ashutosh since leaving home and a

world of good it did her. Everyone at home was fine and she had nothing to worry about. On the contrary, Ashutosh seemed concerned about her, and she had to reassure him. Then, again at her request, David phoned her professor and set up an appointment for an hour and a half later. He gave her detailed instructions on which train to take, where to change and how to get there. He wanted to go with her as far as the nearest Underground station, but she begged him to go with her to the professor's house the first time.

In the station he bought her a week's pass, took out a map of London and showed her where they were and where the professor's residence and the India Office Library were. Once again he explained where to change trains. She hardly heard him. The sight of the escalator had already panicked her. David had to lift her onto it. She breathed a sigh of relief but discovered that David was still holding her rather too closely. She freed herself, but a minute later when it was time to step off she meekly offered herself once again to David's grasp. This time, he held her even more tightly and she could do nothing about it.

The professor turned out to be a nice person. He showed exemplary patience in explaining all the materials she should consult and the manner in which to approach the subject. He even offered to phone

someone he knew at the Library who might be of assistance. David fidgeted throughout, repeatedly glancing at his watch. The moment they left the house he wanted to go on his way, but once again she begged him to take her home. It took some pleading but in the end he did agree, but first he wanted a drink.

They went to a nearby pub. When he asked her what she would like, she refused to have anything. He got two pints of beer for himself and settled into a chair. Half an hour later, suddenly realizing she might be hungry, he suggested that she might as well eat a bite before they left. Taking her money he bought her lunch. The food was bland and unappetising; she nibbled at it listlessly, while he proceeded to have one more pint. A long time after they had entered the pub they left it.

There was no one home, Mrs Patel and her paying guests had all gone out. Ranjana was seized with a sudden fear of being left alone in the house with David. She said a quick goodbye and scampered up the stairs. Moments later there was a knock on her door. She decided to ignore it, but then it occurred to her that it could be somebody else. When she opened the door a crack, David barged in. She didn't have time to protest. The large-size map he brought her was just a pretext. Seated comfortably at the table, he proceeded to slowly unfold it and explain the intricate city routes. She stood as far

away as she could without giving offence, even as she desperately tried to absorb the information. He tried to prolong his stay by asking her all sorts of questions about India. She could see that his intentions were far from honourable and replied curtly, but he wouldn't take the hint. Finally, she had to tell him she was feeling none too well and would like to have a rest. David got up reluctantly, but at the door he suddenly held her in an intimate hug again.

She lay in bed, wondering about him. He was a creep all right, but why hadn't she felt as deeply mortified as she ought to have when somebody other than her husband held her so closely? For years she had taken it for granted that she had irretrievably lost what made a woman desirable; David's behaviour had given her food for thought; and oddly enough, it hadn't felt so unpleasant, either. But she vowed not to have anything to do with him. She swung her legs off the bed and busied herself with a long and careful study of the city map he had left her. She must learn to go to places on her own.

She met Javed at dinner and wondered if she shouldn't find out a little more about him, whether he was worth befriending. Not only was he strikingly handsome, but he was very polite and well-behaved. A university lecturer in English in Pakistan, he had been to London

before and was ready to give her whatever help she might need to settle in.

Next morning they walked together to the Underground. In the station he drew her route on a piece of paper, so that she could change trains and reach the Library without asking anybody for help. She found it all so complicated that she stood staring at the platform. When he reminded her to go to another platform, she looked so lost and helpless that after a quick glance at his watch he offered to accompany her. It hadn't taken any begging on her part, nor did he attempt to grab her when it came to getting on the escalator.

Ranjana suddenly remembered all the lights had been left on. She got up and walked into the next room. As she was about to turn the lights off her eyes fell on the wall mirror. She stood before it awhile. In the next room the windows were wide open. Had they been open when she had come in earlier to switch the lights on? The windows overlooked the garden and there was little chance of passers-by seeing her, but still she felt a rising sense of shame. Then a strange thought came into her mind: what if somebody could see her now! She switched off the lights, went into another room, opened the windows and looked out. She could now be clearly seen from the road, but it was completely deserted. She flicked

off the lights and walked out into the inner courtyard. On the far side stood the cow shed. As she approached it, she felt hot and peeled off her pullover. She saw the cow staring at her. She stopped in front of the animal: Boula, you're about the only living thing that can see me now, so go ahead and drink in the sight.

Inside of a week she became fairly familiar with London. She took to wearing her jeans; she went places on her own, she caught on to the clipped British accent and conversed with strangers without feeling shy; she assimilated herself into the Patel household. She did not see David around anymore. Perhaps he had gone back to wherever he had come from. She liked the black man who had taken the room next to hers. A large jovial man, he was full of flirtatious praise for Ranjana's beauty and often joked that were he not married already he'd certainly have fallen for such a perfect Indian beauty. Her work in the Library progressed and on Sunday she went sightseeing with Javed. The sight of men and women hugging, kissing and showing affection for each other in public no longer offended her.

She grew to like Javed a lot and spent most of her free time with him. She found him sensitive, well-behaved, even a little too respectful – not really warm enough. Sometimes he was stiff and formal for no

reason. While she unburdened herself freely, he did not reveal much about himself. She so wanted him to laugh and joke with her, even flirt a little, but he continued being solemn and wasn't ever as light-hearted as with other people. One day when she was in the shower he had suddenly entered the bathroom; he had withdrawn instantly, muttering an apology. The fault was certainly not his – Ranjana wondered how she could have forgotten to lock the door – but what seemed worse than her shame at being surprised in the shower was the sense of guilt which seemed to overwhelm him, and she decided she needed to make him feel better.

A day or two later she barged into his room, causing him visible consternation, but he quickly got a grip on himself. Recollecting that he had mentioned he was unmarried, she wanted to know if he was in love with someone. Afterwards she would wonder at her behaviour: what had made her go into a stranger's room and ask him a strictly personal question? Javed blushed when he nodded yes and showed her the photograph of a girl. She held it in her hand for a long time but had already lost all interest in the subject. She veered the topic around to her research, his experiences at the university and his parents. After some time he asked her whether she'd like some tea. Instead of answering, she demanded to know if he drank, and when he

answered that he did, she said she wanted to go with him to a pub that evening and find out for herself what it felt like to drink. Javed was hesitant, but she forced him to agree.

At the pub, she insisted on drinking the same thing he did, although he repeatedly advised her to settle for wine. So he got her a pint of beer, and she drank it without pleasure. Then she wanted to stand him a round and wouldn't take no for an answer. It was quite late when she had finished her beer. She was feeling light-headed as she left the pub. At Mrs Patel's everyone had gone to bed. Javed re-heated the food the landlady had left for those who hadn't been able to join her at six, and they sat down to dinner. Ranjana could feel a horrible headache coming on. She was so unsteady as she climbed the stairs that she needed help. Javed was such a gentleman; he held her most discreetly, left her at her door and quickly walked back to his room. She went in and collapsed on the bed without changing. The headache became steadily worse and she didn't have the patience to open her suitcase and look for the medicine Ashutosh had packed. She dragged herself out of her room and knocked on Javed's door. When it opened a little, she asked plaintively if he had something for headaches. Javed didn't ask her in. He pushed something towards her through the crack, and she went back to

her room. She had no desire to take the medicine; she threw herself on the bed and passed out.

Time went by quickly. Her research at the Library was finished, her stay was drawing to an end. She went to her professor to say goodbye, got her return ticket confirmed and phoned Ashutosh. She settled Mrs Patel's bill, bought all the presents she wanted, along with a new suitcase to carry everything. The moment she expressed a twinge of apprehension about lugging two bulging suitcases to the airport, Javed offered to come with her.

On the evening before her departure she was alone with him at dinner. After they had finished eating, he wanted to know how her packing was going, but she wouldn't answer. He made coffee and they drank it in silence. After a long time he gently enquired what time she intended to leave for the airport; he wanted to know so that he would have enough time to get ready to accompany her. When she wondered out loud how on earth she was going to wake up so early in the morning, he promptly offered her his alarm clock.

He wiped off the dinner table and they went up. At the top of the stairs she stopped. Would an alarm clock be any help? Since Javed was a light sleeper, would he mind waking her up? He said he wouldn't. Before she turned in she whispered she would leave her door

unlocked all night.

Already feverish, Ranjana tore off her clothes and threw herself on the bed, surrendering to the ministrations of her frantic fingers, all thoughts pushed out of her mind. She felt she was outside her past, present and future, floating free in space, light years from the earth. All she could hear was her own quickening breath; all she could smell was her own intimate odour. Her senses seemed to have converged on a single pulsating point. She tried to recall Javed's face, but it remained hazy and blurred. Dizzy, desperate, drowning, she summoned up Srimant's face as she gave herself pleasure with sweet urgency.

The Mantra

Prabhakar was in a flutter when he returned home from the office that evening. 'You know what,' he couldn't wait to tell his wife, 'Swamiji has decided to stay at the chief engineer's in the end.'

'Which Swamiji?' Suhasini asked, although she remembered having read in the papers that some holy man had descended on the state capital. Normally, she would have dreaded the idea of having to listen to her husband go on about it, but she wanted a diversion. Prabhakar's pet topic was his office.

'Look at you! Just because you stay at home you don't have to shut yourself off from the world. The great Swamiji has deigned to leave his Himalayan abode after a long time and come here, of all places, but you're blissfully ignorant of it. You know something, the chief minister himself went to the airport to receive him.'

'Oh.' She was put off by his snide remark. So what if she stayed at home?

'Now the chief engineer's problems will be over,' he went on. 'God knows he's moved heaven and earth to get Swamiji to agree to stay with him.'

Whatever curiosity she had evaporated instantly. The talk had fallen back into the same old groove: the office, who toadied up to whom; who gave whom hell; who was corrupt to his bones and who was not; who pulled

strings to advance his career and who was out to make life difficult for somebody else.

Even after he got into bed, Prabhakar kept on. 'If the chief engineer's transfer order is cancelled,' he said, returning to the same subject, 'it will be proof positive of Swamiji's powers.'

She was still in a foul mood and didn't miss the opportunity to needle him. 'So why don't you catch hold of this swamiji too? The vigilance case against you is still on the books.'

'Shhh, not so loud!' he cautioned her. The children were in another room and perhaps fast asleep, but still . . . His voice dropped. 'Plenty of them buggers do what they want and nothing happens to them, but when it comes to poor me they start a case. The bloody thing's been left dangling on purpose so that they can keep on taking advantage of me. And what a ludicrous charge: materials listed in the inventory not available in the stores. Ha! Within seven days . . .'

He trotted out the same old explanation he had provided in his official reply, more to comfort himself than to convince Suhasini. He was sure that, like all the other officers into making money, he'd eventually get off the hook, but his one lasting regret was that unlike other wives his own didn't give him any moral support. Not only was she indifferent to his mental agony, but she

seemed blatantly disinterested in the progress of the case.

'Are you asleep?' he inquired, cutting short his account.

'Yes.'

Far from it, she was wide awake. His remark about not keeping track of what was going on in the outside world still rankled. And what precious news! Some swamiji or other making a brief sojourn in some corrupt chief engineer's house! She remembered that when she was at university she had been serious not only about what she was studying – political science – but that she had kept up on current national and international affairs; she had made a name for herself not only as a good student but as a student leader too; she had participated in all aspects of university life, from sports to drama. She and her friends had once been caught smoking; they had ragged the hell out of a hapless lecturer when he came to take his first class; once they had had to scale the hostel gate after a late night show. She had given up thinking about all that, but tonight the memories seemed to come flooding back: how she had won the annual debating prize; how she and her friends had sung uproariously all the way back in the train; the words of a two-line poem she had composed for a boy she had had a crush on; the exhilaration and shame at someone's

hand brushing past her breasts in a darkened movie hall. No point in remembering all that, she sighed. All her hopes and ambitions had been crushed when she had suddenly been married off in the middle of her doctoral work. Friends of hers not half as bright as she had landed plum jobs and were now on the road to success while she had spent her years moving from one small town to another. Her junior engineer husband had eventually been promoted to executive engineer, but her own promotion had consisted in her two children, accumulating more gadgets and possessions, and a few more servants. She had learnt to banish her discontent and sense of a lack of self-fulfillment by reminding herself daily that her most important job was to bring up her children. And twenty years had passed.

Suhasini had never had a serious disagreement with Prabhakar, but they were not on the same wavelength. He was an unabashed materialist, putting all his time and energy into acquiring more and more things. He had a reputation for being hardworking and was no more corrupt than any of his colleagues; he was diligent at the office, and at home he made endless plans: where to build their next house, what new things to buy, where to invest his black money. She had no interest in any of this. Sometimes he would show her a blueprint for a new house and ask her for suggestions, but all she would

do would be to nod her head absent-mindedly in agreement. He felt hurt that whenever he gave her a new piece of jewelry or papers for new investments she'd indifferently put them into the closet without a glimmer of joy or gratitude. His sole consolation was that despite her utter indifference there had been prosperity at home. Whatever hopes he had had that she'd have a change of heart and take an active interest in his career and their future after they moved to the state capital had been dashed. She was as indifferent as ever. Their daughter was enrolled in college and their son was in the final year of school, and Suhasini had ceased worrying about them. She helped them with their lessons, but now she had time to look up old friends and to tend her little garden. It was a source of bewilderment for Prabhakar that she didn't seem to care how hard he worked to make some extra money so that their creature comforts were taken care of. Still, despite her clear lack of interest, every evening he would unfailingly give her a blow-by-blow account of office affairs.

A couple of days later he returned home much later than usual.

'I went to see Swamiji,' he said, 'and what a brilliant talk he gave! It was on the Gita. Seems he's writing a book on it.'

'Thousands of books have been written on it already,' she said, 'and there'll be thousands more. Doubtless every swamiji-come-lately will take a shot at it.'

'I don't know what the book will be like, but his words were like divine music to my ears. Once he started no one felt like leaving. Not only the Gita – Swamiji lectures on the Bible and the Koran too. I intend to go to hear him every evening.'

'If the fellow is supposed to work miracles,' she interrupted, 'why don't you tell him about your vigilance case?'

'It's impossible to talk to him alone. You should see the crowd! After his talk, he takes whoever has struck his fancy into the inner sanctum and gives them a mantra. The mantra is a secret; no one knows what it is. You know who he chose this evening? Mr. Rao, the filthy rich contractor. Of all people! Mind you, there was a minister in the gathering.'

'When do you think you'll get your turn?'

'Who knows. He meets people the whole day long. It's like a big fair over there at the chief engineer's. His drawing room has turned into an ashram. That's where Swamiji gives his talks, explains away your doubts, answers all your questions. It's only when he wants to give someone a mantra that he seeks the lucky person out and takes them into the inner sanctum.'

'A good diversion for the time being, anyway. You all were about to expire of boredom, didn't know what to do after office hours. Good entertainment now that there's Swamiji to watch.'

'What kind of talk is that?' he snapped. 'If you listened to Swamiji you'd be convinced.'

The following days, Prabhakar religiously went to the evening talks, and Suhasini had to put up with his nightly commentaries. Swamiji was virtually swamped by a crowd that was growing larger and larger and had to move into a much bigger rented place. He had a mission as well: to raise funds for a hospital in his ashram. The politicians, industrialists and bureaucrats had already poured millions of rupees into his coffers, and he looked forward to returning to the Himalayas once he had collected enough.

One day Prabhakar returned home in a state of high excitement. 'The chief engineer's transfer has been cancelled!'

Suhasini showed no interest.

'Who would have dreamt this would be possible!' he nevertheless continued. 'Simply unthinkable!'

'So Swamiji does have the power to work miracles,' she commented dryly.

If he thought she would badger him for details, he

had another thing coming. Her lack of interest was monumental. A couple of days later, however, when he came home and said that he had caught Swamiji's eye for a mantra, she was curious.

'So what did he give you? How did he give it to you?'

'Tell you later,' he said, annoyed at having been given the cold-shoulder for so long.

He did not show any eagerness to tell her, and she was determined not to ask again. But in bed she couldn't resist any longer.

'You said Swamiji chose you. What mantra did he give you?'

Prabhakar launched into a long tedious speech. Swamiji had been at his scintillating best that evening; he had given a memorable talk on the Kathopanishad, responding to questions and clearing up doubts. Then he had glanced over the audience until his eyes had come to rest on Prabhakar. Swamiji had led him into the inner sanctum, which had been made over into a worship room, and had asked him to sit down, saying, 'Don't worry, that little problem of yours will be sorted out soon.'

Before she could say anything, Prabhakar hastened to add, 'You may wonder why I'm making such a big deal about it, since what Swamiji said could be true of anyone – who on earth doesn't have a problem or two, after all? But when he started talking about the subtle

ramifications of my case there was no doubt in my mind whatsoever. He had seen it all with his divine eyes.'

'How could he have come to know about you and your problem? For that matter, how can he possibly know about the problems of each and everyone who's making a beeline for him? Of course, it's quite different if he collects the information on all of you beforehand.'

'True, he's surrounded by the wife and children of the chief engineer all the time, but why would any of them bother to fill him in on my affairs? Anyway, Swamiji has assured me that he'll take care of my problem.'

'What mantra did he give you?'

'He didn't give me one, just a slip of paper with nothing on it and asked me to wait until my turn came again.'

'That's all?' Suhasini sounded as if she had been let down.

'You can't judge Swamiji from my going on about him. You need to listen to his talks yourself. As for me, I haven't seen a greater sage in all my life.'

'I don't need sages. If I want wisdom, I can read the scriptures.' After a pause she inquired, 'Do women go to see him?'

'More than half the crowd are women, and during office hours there are almost only women. Why don't you go once and see for yourself?'

'I can't be bothered.'

But she was intrigued, especially after Swamiji picked Prabhakar for the mantra. She wanted to know why people were flocking to him, what was so special about his talks.

A few days later, when the children were out for the evening, she agreed to go with Prabhakar to hear Swamiji.

In spite of her deep-seated prejudice against swamijis of all hues, she had to admit that at first glance this man was something. The room was overflowing with people, and he was seated on a raised platform at the front. He was about her age, if not younger, and impeccably groomed. A five-star swamiji, a designer monk – his hair, his beard, his flowing ochre robe, all seemed to suggest a handsome matinee idol playing the part of a swamiji. His most striking feature was his eyes, which seemed to bore right through you. They might easily have been damned as roving in another situation, but here they were hailed as omniscient, penetrating, mesmerizing. His talk turned out to be even more impressive. Quoting extensively from biographical accounts by both Indians and foreigners, he spoke at length on Ramakrishna Paramhansa, the unlettered saint who had shaken middle-class Calcutta out of its torpor. Clearly, he had a way with words. She had to admit that he was well-

read. At the end of his talk he chose the wife of an important bureaucrat in the state administration for the mantra.

'Now you believe me, don't you?' remarked Prabhakar on the way home.

'He spoke well, that's all. But find out if the talks he gave earlier have been taped.'

From then on Suhasini went to listen to Swamiji whenever she had a chance. He never repeated himself, and each talk was as profound as it was memorable. During the day he remained surrounded mostly by women followers, since the men were away at their offices. Suhasini began to attend the afternoon sessions as well. She had grown fond of his lectures, but what she couldn't get over was his practice of leading a new person every day into the inner sanctum to impart the mantra. She found the whole thing quite indecent. Others did too, for as soon as Swamiji led the chosen one inside there would be a barely suppressed wave of sniggers and snide remarks all around. What saved appearances was that the door to the inner room was not completely shut and that there were members of the chief engineer's family going in and out.

A few days passed. She began to wonder why Swamiji hadn't yet picked her. Not that she was no longer re-

pelled by what she considered an intrinsically indecent and obscene practice, with a strong sexual undercurrent. Maybe he was above all that. He didn't choose only young and good-looking women. But was he? She couldn't be sure.

Her curiosity grew stronger by the day about how the mantra was given. Her husband had told her something about it. He had gone back to obtain his and Swamiji had asked him to fold the slip of paper he had given him earlier and drop it into an empty bag. Then he was told to pull it out again. He was not to open it until he was back home. Once there, Prabhakar couldn't wait to open it: there was a mantra written on it, but he had been forbidden to share it with anyone, not even his wife, and for once Suhasini found herself dying of curiosity.

The day the fat lump of a woman who usually sat beside her was chosen, Suhasini thought it was time for her to do something. Although she was no longer exactly young she had taken such good care of her looks and figure that people found her very attractive. When she set out for the talk the following day she had groomed herself with extra care and put on an eye-catching sari. But Swamiji's eyes simply swept over her, leaving her to curse him in silence. Good enough, she'd been spared the mortification. Nevertheless she began to dress

more and more fashionably and sought out positions in the front row, where she would be clearly visible. Her self-image and pride were at stake; Swamiji's attention had to be captured. She began to sharpen her glances until they gleamed like knives.

No wonder Swamiji capitulated, he simply had no other choice. One afternoon he picked her for the mantra. A sense of victory overcame her as she rose from among the others, even as the gentle but suggestive tittering she knew would follow made her feel somewhat ashamed. Her mental preparation to face Swamiji alone began the moment he led her into the inner sanctum, which turned out to be exactly as Prabhakar had described it. On one side of the room were the idols and images of gods and goddesses on a wooden platform, and on the other was a divan with a deerskin across it. The young woman making arrangements for the worship finished and left, pulling the door gently behind her. Suhasini recognised her: the chief engineer's wife's younger sister. Swamiji sat down on the divan, indicating to her a place at his feet. She found that downright insulting, though somehow it hadn't seemed so in the lecture hall.

'Surely you don't expect me to sit on the floor,' she said, 'while you take the divan?'

'Nobody has objected to that before! Even the chief

minister sits at my feet.' He moved a little to one side, to make room for her, but it was so cramped that she realized that she'd have been better off on the floor.

'What's your name, Ma?' He looked her up and down with interest, using the pronoun indicating familiarity.

Ma? she wondered. Was he being fresh? But then addressing a married woman as Ma couldn't be taken as exactly disrespectful, and all swamijis had the liberty to speak as familiarly as they pleased. She decided to tell him her name without protest.

'A sweet name indeed,' he said. 'But I'd much rather call you Swaha. That's it. Swaha is the Fire-God's wife and one among the sixteen hundred divine mothers.'

Fair enough, she responded in silence, wait until I burn you to cinders. She found herself using the familiar form of address just as he had.

'One look at your face and everything becomes transparent,' said Swamiji. 'What is it that makes your conjugal life unhappy, Ma?'

'Whose isn't, at least a little? You could ask that about almost everyone without fear of being contradicted.'

'But does a look at just anyone's face reveal her husband's name to be Prabhakar?'

She felt a stab of defeat: the fellow had turned out to be a deep-water fish; he'd done his homework. She had to be careful how she spoke and what she said. She

looked up at him. He was staring at her with supreme self-possession. Was there a hint of sarcasm in his eyes?

'I'll erase all your unhappiness,' he said, his hands on her face gently closing her eyes.

The dim light and aroma of incense and sandalwood lent the room an agreeable atmosphere of peacefulness and lightness. With her eyes closed she experienced a heady feeling of freedom. His hands exerted a gentle pressure, his fingers running playfully through her hair. When he cupped her face she opened her eyes wide and fixed him with a cold stare. Swamiji did not flinch; he did not withdraw his hands. She couldn't recollect a single instance in all her adult life when somebody besides her husband had ever held her like this. Some had touched her on the sly, making it seem an accident, but Swamiji oozed boldness and confidence. Things seemed to be slipping out of control.

'Will you give me a mantra?' She was a little uneasy.

Swamiji got up and walked across the room to the platform on which the idols had been placed and picked up a slip of paper. Settling back close beside her, he tucked it into her fist. His hand stayed on hers. After a moment of reflection she placed her other hand on theirs.

'I intend to give you a special mantra,' he said, 'but we need to worship first.'

He walked over to the other side of the room again

and sat down in front of the idols. She followed him and lowered herself down beside him.

'Take off your things.'

She slowly slipped off her rings and bangles and undid her earrings. Her body felt on fire. She glanced at him. The heat of his eyes was scorching.

'Everything.'

She had half a mind to walk out but instead found herself glancing helplessly at the door.

He got up and bolted it.

When she came back to her senses she realized a tape of mantras was on. The heat had left her body and there was a calming air of peace and tranquility all around. The slip of paper was still in her clenched fist.

'Is this how you give everyone your special mantra?' she asked.

'Only to those who take my fancy.' He gave a little laugh.

'You're nothing but a con man.'

'In the space of a single day you've done two things nobody else has dared attempt: you've objected to sitting at my feet, and you've used the informal form of address to speak to me.'

'I don't think I was off the mark,' she said, nestling against him and tweaking his cheek. 'You're a fake, a

fraud.'

'True, and when are you coming back to be conned again?'

'Maybe I won't. Ever. But that doesn't mean I want to stop listening to your talks. Whatever you may be, you speak very well – your lectures are truly memorable.'

'In that case maybe I have just the job for you. My followers are after me to publish my lectures. Perhaps you could transcribe the tapes? It'll give you the pretext you need to come and see me as often as you want.'

'You truly are a damned con man – a randy one at that.' She rose to her feet, tucking the slip of paper into her handbag.

Swamiji hugged her. 'Come again. And soon.'

'I'll see.'

On her way out she met the chief engineer's pretty sister-in-law, and a wave of shame and contrition swept over her. But she quickly got over it, deciding to take stock of the situation only once she was home.

Back home, however, she was kept busy, with chores to do and with looking after the children and the guests.

'My vigilance file was closed today,' Prabhakar announced in high excitement, when he arrived home that evening.

'How did that happen?'

'Swamiji must have had a hand in it; I can't think of any other explanation. Think about it – a vigilance file kept alive for ages is suddenly closed! I intend to go to Swamiji right now with some money. Will you accompany me?'

She wanted to but decided against it. 'I was there this afternoon.'

'Two visits a day isn't forbidden. You know something – you're a born sceptic, you've never had respect for self-realized souls. It'd take a miracle to turn you into a believer. Say what you wish, Swamiji works miracles. My own case is proof enough.'

She told Prabhakar about receiving half the mantra that afternoon – she would have to go back for the other half – and about Swamiji's proposal relating to preparing the transcripts for publication. He felt gratified: she had taken to Swamiji, never mind how little.

The following afternoon, as she was debating whether or not to go to see Swamiji, she received the tapes.

Now she didn't have to go to his talks; she could meet him anytime – alone – to discuss progress in transcribing the tapes. He changed his schedule to give her ample time: suddenly the book had become his top priority. The wind had been taken out of the sails of the gossips too. Prabhakar was elated: his wife had been transformed

into an ardent follower. Swamiji had found someone to bare his soul to.

'You said you can make the mantra appear on blank paper,' she said one day, taking the slip of paper out of her handbag. 'Do it. I want to see the miracle.'

Swamiji took the cloth bag from the pedestal and guided her hand inside it. There she found the secret pocket and fished out an identical slip of paper. She unfolded it. Across it was written: Om Sri.

'How long can you fool people?' she said. 'Sooner rather than later you'll be found out.'

'People should realize it's impossible to make a mantra appear on blank paper, yet still they want a miracle. What harm is there if I fulfill their childish expectations? Don't doctors sometimes give patients placebos?'

'But you seem to be doing more than that. You got the chief engineer's transfer cancelled; you got my husband's vigilance file closed and buried.'

'That's nothing; with the kind of followers I have, making such things happen is simple.'

'What about the money you say you're collecting for your hospital?'

'Believe me, that must be the one good thing I've ever set my heart on. Every coin goes to it. Thanks to my followers I don't want for anything and don't need more money. So why not do a good turn for once?' He

reached for a box under the divan and opened it. It was full of money and jewelry.

'I believe you,' she said, rolling a bangle off her wrist and dropping it in. 'That's my contribution. Tell me, will you invite me when you inaugurate your hospital?'

Swamiji became serious. 'Just when things were going fine, there's been a sudden snag. I don't know what's in store. I'll tell you about it some day.'

Over the following days he hardly had any time for her, and when he did he was never alone; either the publisher or somebody else was always present. At first this put her off by this and she berated him in her mind, but then it dawned on her that perhaps the problem he had hinted at had caught up with him.

A few days passed, and then one evening Prabhakar came home with the news: Swamiji had bolted town!

'I knew something like this would happen,' he commented.

'You never said so.' She made an effort to hide her irritation.

'These swamijis are all alike – basically after money and women, no matter how holy they pretend to be.'

She didn't respond.

'Take you, for example. You were so contemptuous

in the beginning, but what an ardent follower you turned into!'

She didn't want to get into an argument, at least for now. 'When I listened to his talks I realized he was a man of deep knowledge; when I spoke to him I realized he was honest.'

'People are saying nasty things about the women he gave mantras to.'

Suhasini walked off.

It made front page headlines in the papers the next day: Swamiji had vanished into the blue. Not only had he taken off with the money and jewelry, but he had been able to con people simply because of the political patronage he enjoyed. The hospital project for which many rich ladies had given away their entire cache of gold ornaments didn't exist. The police was preparing a list of all those who had been taken in. As well, a young woman from a well-known family was missing.

Prabhakar phoned Suhasini from the office. 'If the police come around to question you, tell them you know nothing.'

'What about?'

'About Swamiji,' he snapped with evident irritation. 'Tell you all about it when I get home.'

The police didn't show up. In the evening, Prabhakar

gave her the gossip: in addition to what he had collected, the con man had spirited away the chief engineer's luscious sister-in-law; the officers and businessmen were lying low because they all had given him fat donations of black money; women had complained to the police that he had cast spells on them to get them to part with their jewelry. His eyes searched Suhasini's ears and hands. 'Hope he didn't manage to wheedle anything out of you.'

'I gave him a gold bangle.'

Whatever retort he wanted to make, he stopped short because the children returned home just then, but when they were in bed he returned to the matter. 'Did he hypnotize you to make you give him the gold bangle?'

'I gave it willingly, of my own accord.'

'Is there a bigger fool than you? At least the others were under some kind of spell and didn't know what they were doing, but you . . . How in your right mind could you have given him a gold bangle?'

'Don't forget that the gold bangle was mine, given me by my parents.'

He brought home bits of news the following days. A police officer friend of his had shown him the list of women involved with Swamiji. He was relieved to see that Suhasini's name didn't figure on it, although every-

one knew how close she had been to Swamiji when she was working on the transcriptions. He had the nagging suspicion that his friend might have deleted her name out of pity for her. He had faith in her, though he didn't take kindly to her giving away a gold bangle.

Some days later the police nabbed Swamiji and laid their hands on everything he'd taken. The chief engineer's pretty sister-in-law was restored to the bosom of her family, and she told all and sundry how she had been drugged and hypnotized. The women who had lost their ornaments thronged the police station, claiming the same thing had happened to them. Prabhakar begged Suhasini to file a claim for her bangle, but she showed no interest in doing so. 'Why would I want to take back something I gave away willingly?' But he couldn't accept this and asked his police officer friend if all the pieces of jewelry had been identified and restored to their rightful owners. Everything, it turned out, had already been claimed.

Following the police investigation, salacious stories of Swamiji's sex escapades with the ladies of the town made the rounds. The publication of his lectures added fuel to the fire. In the preface Swamiji paid Suhasini profuse thanks for her role in bringing out the book. When, with a friend, Prabhakar saw the book, he went red in the face. People gossiping among themselves about

Swamiji's philandering was one thing, but having his wife's name linked to Swamiji in print was quite another.

'We'll become the subject of gossip in every household now!' he said, flinging a copy of the book at her.

She picked it up and rifled through it. 'Handsome production.'

'You're mentioned in the preface.'

'Swamiji showed it to me before sending it to the publishers. I did actually help him with the transcriptions. You were so encouraging in those days.'

'Things were different then. The fellow hadn't been found out for what he really was – a cad dressed in ochre robes!'

'But does that make his talks any less interesting? They are as fine as any. I think everyone should read the book.'

'You seem to be taking his side. Did you have something going on with him like the other women?'

'Yes.' Her voice was icy cold.

'You didn't tell me about it before!' His voice rose.

'You never asked.'

'He must have put a hex on you.'

'He did nothing of the sort. Whatever I did I did willingly, not without thinking, deliberately.'

Prabhakar walked away.

The next day he returned home late. He didn't speak to her the whole day. But the following day, returning from the office, he found himself alone with her; the children had gone out. While having tea he couldn't help bringing the topic up.

'You might not have been aware that you were already under his spell. If the bloody fellow worked it on so many women, I can't believe he spared you.'

Suhasini remained silent.

'The bloody fellow was well up on the art of casting spells. Oh, that reminds me, didn't you tell me that he gave you a mantra? He gave me a slip of paper with a mantra on it and asked me to keep it a secret, saying that sharing it with anyone could bring harm.' He retrieved the paper from the cupboard and unfolded it. 'Harm my foot. I'm going to show it to the whole world.'

Suhasini remained silent.

'Let's see the mantra he gave you,' he said. 'He must have warned you not to show it to anyone. To hell with that.'

Without a word she got up and produced a slip of paper from her handbag. There was nothing on it.

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